

The Great Pudding Conspiracy by nfna118

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Summary:

Monday, November 28, 1983.

Dustin has a plan to acquire the recently-discovered stash of chocolate pudding and drags the rest of the Party into his schemes.

The Great Pudding Conspiracy

Author's Note:

It's summer again, and I have a little time to write! I hope to complete one or two more stories this year. As always, feel free to share headcanons/fic ideas and if they fit in with my own thoughts, I'll try to include them!

You do NOT need to read any of the other works in the series to understand this one. I just like to keep them together since they all belong to the same canon-compliant universe.

Monday, November 28, 1983

By signing this document, you hereby show your support for making "Hunt's Snack Pack Chocolate Pudding" (hereafter referred to as "chocolate pudding") generally available to the student body of Hawkins Middle School at lunchtime. The names signed below recognize that the Lunch Ladies have been hoarding extra chocolate pudding cups for themselves instead of selling them to the deserving children. No one is under no means guaranteeing fair chocolate pudding distribution if you sign, but your signature will help. This form is legal. It is still legal when erased. This form cannot be made void. It is still legal when mangled or destroyed. Wrong handed signatures are not legal. Fake signatures are not legal. Spelling errors do not count. Grammatical errors do not count.

Dustin bounced his leg under the table as he waited for the rest of the Party to finish reading. Lucas had one eyebrow raised as he read, Will had his eyebrows furrowed, and Mike somehow had no expression at all for the first time in his goddamn life to give a hint of what he might be thinking. Dustin's leg bounced faster.

Lucas finished first. "So what do you think?" Dustin asked as soon as they made eye contact.

"Hey!" said Mike. "Some of us are still reading over here!"

Dustin rolled his eyes. "Hurry up then, slowpoke!"

Mike glared back at him, not even pretending to try to finish.

"If you're not even going to –"

Mike cut him off with a quick jerk of his head and his eyes flitted over to Will, who was still hunched over the piece of notebook paper.

Dustin let out a huff and drummed his fingers on the table until Lucas slapped his hand. Hard.

"Ow!" he cried, shaking his hand out. "What the hell was that for?"

"For being an impatient git," Lucas shot back.

"Yeah, that," Mike seconded, not looking up in favor of watching Will's progress.

Once Will finally – *finally* – looked up, Dustin was basically bouncing out of his seat. "So?"

"Sooooo...?" Lucas dragged out the word.

Dustin went to punch his arm, but Lucas blocked him. "So, what do you think? Are we gonna do this?"

Mike snorted. "Can we stop you, you mean?"

"No, Mike, no. That's not what I mean. I want to do this together. As a *Party*," he said, spreading his arms wide to encompass the other three.

"What's all this stuff at the end, anyway?" asked Lucas. "Who's gonna – mangle your petition? And if you don't want people to erase it, why didn't you use pen?"

"Well, it's too late now," Dustin retorted. "I'm not gonna rewrite the whole damn thing when we already have a perfectly viable petition right here. And I wrote some petitions back at my old school so that's where all the boilerdish –"

“Boilerplate?”

“Boilerdish, boilerplate, whatever, Mike.” Dustin waved a hand dismissively. “That’s where all the boilertableware comes from.”

“Did people tear up your petitions there?” asked Will.

“Once or twice,” Dustin muttered.

“Why?”

“They were mouthbreathers, I dunno.” He shrugged.

“So you think Troy and James might –” Mike started.

Dustin threw his hands up. “It’s just there to be safe! God! Are we gonna do this or not?”

“Yeah, I’m down,” Lucas replied. “Can we change ‘children’ to ‘students’, though? ‘Children’ makes me feel like we’re five or something.”

“Yeah, sure.” He brought the paper back towards him and pulled a pencil out of his pocket.

“Wait,” interrupted Mike, “So *you* can erase things and change them?”

“I mean... No one’s signed it yet, so it doesn’t affect anything.”

“But what’s to stop you from changing it after we sign it? Not cool, man.” Lucas shook his head.

“Do you really think I’m – ugh, here.” He crossed out “children”, wrote “students” above it, and initialed next to the edit. “Happy now?”

“Yes,” replied Lucas, a smug smile flitting about his lips as he leaned back and took a bite of his apple.

“Will? Mike? You in?”

“I –” started Mike, eyes wide and sounding unsure, then turned to

look at Will. “What do you think, Will?”

Will glanced briefly up at Mike, then turned to Dustin. “So remind me about what exactly went down?”

“So you know how they hardly ever have chocolate pudding, right? And how I’ve always told you Lunch Lady Phyllis is just hoarding it for herself?” Everyone rolled their eyes and Mike let out an audible scoff. “So anyways, once Chief Hopper and your mom left us alone in the middle school to go find you, it was the perfect opportunity! Plus, like, El needed to recharge and shit.” Mike winced and Will knocked their knees together. “So Lucas and I went back to the kitchen freezer – because apparently they don’t bother locking the doors around here? – and what do you know, I was right. I was fucking right. A whole freezer full of the stuff!”

“Well...”

“Okay, fine, Lucas. A freezer *shelf* full of the stuff. Geez.”

“And you’ve waited until now to address it because...?”

“For you to get back, obviously! So we can complete this quest together! Will you join me, brave adventurers?”

Mike and Will shared a look. Will’s eyes flickered up and down, and the corners of Mike’s mouth turned up. “Yeah,” Mike said, then finally turned back to Dustin, “We’re in.”

“Sweet!” Dustin crowed. “So if you’ll just –”

“Yeah, yeah,” Lucas deadpanned, reaching for a pencil.

“Slowpoke,” needled Mike, pencil already in hand. He signed the first line, then ignored Lucas to hand the petition to Will, earning himself a smack on the arm.

“Ow,” he muttered.

Will let out a snort. “You deserved that.”

Mike let out a long-suffering sigh, but a smile still played around his

lips as he finally handed the paper to Lucas.

Lucas signed with a flourish. "So now what?"

"So now what?" Dustin sounded indignant. "So now what? So now we get signatures!"

"But how?" Lucas shot back. "Everyone hates us!" Will's face fell a little.

"That's not true!" Mike butted in. Lucas raised an eyebrow. "Well," he backpedaled, "obviously *some* of them do. But a lot of people just... don't notice us one way or the other, y'know?"

"Oh, yeah, 'cause *that's* better. Being a nobody is *so* much better," drawled Dustin.

Lucas leaned forward and brought his voice down low. "Guys," he started. Everyone else leaned in to hear, although Will a couple seconds later than the other two. "Guys, we can use this to our advantage!"

"Huh?" asked Will.

Lucas smirked. "This gives us an excuse to talk to cute girls!" He wiggled his eyebrows suggestively.

Dustin watched as Will's face paled, his eyes widening as he unconsciously drew closer to Mike. Mike subtly turned his body to accommodate Will, shooting Lucas a glare. His hand flexed but returned to his lap.

"Well, *I'm* in," said Dustin, smiling widely. Mike whispered something to Will, who whispered harshly back, but then let a smile flash across his lips.

"So how exactly is asking for signatures going to help us get girlfriends?" asked Mike.

"I mean, it'll get you to talk to them! At least Dustin and I *talk* to girls!"

"I talk to girls!"

"Holly and Nancy don't count."

"I – screw you, Lucas! I talk to plenty of girls!"

"Oh yeah, like who?"

"Uh, I mean... There's Mary Ellen."

"Yeah, 'cause she's your assigned English partner."

"So?" Mike bit back. Will bumped knees with him. "Whatever, man," he said, scowling.

"So you admit the superiority of my plan, then?"

"Guys, guys!" Dustin interrupted before Mike could spit out a reply. "So there's, what, 60 or 70 kids in our grade? So like 200 kids in the school. So if each of us only gets 5 signatures – boys or girls – that'll be like 10% of the school!"

"But there's only one petition," Will pointed out. "What are we gonna do, take turns?"

"I mean, yeah, what else would we do?" Dustin replied. Will shrugged. "We can each take it for like a day or something and we'll have plenty of signatures by the end of the week!"

"And phone numbers," Lucas added, wiggling his eyebrows again. He wasn't quite quick enough to dodge Mike's backhand. Even Will let out a laugh at that.

* * *

Tuesday, November 29, 1983

Dustin watched as Mike and Will waited in line to pay for their lunch. Mike and Will always bought the school lunch, Dustin's mom always packed him a sack lunch, and Lucas alternated randomly like a madman. Sure, he claimed he only bought on the "good lunch" days, but he wasn't even consistent about that. In fact... "Hey,

Lucas!"

"Hmm?" Lucas looked up mid-bite.

"I thought you liked Sloppy Joes?"

Lucas shrugged. "They're pretty good, why?"

"Because that's what they're serving for lunch today."

Lucas rolled his eyes. "This again? Really?"

"Yes, this again! I don't understand your decision algorithm for whether you buy or bring lunch, and I'm beginning to suspect you don't have one!"

Lucas shrugged. "Mom made lasagna last night," he said, gesturing at the leftovers he was eating. "Lasagna trumps Sloppy Joes."

"Lasagna absolutely trumps Sloppy Joes," Mike chimed in as he sat down on Lucas's left. Dustin threw up his hands in disgust as Will laughed.

"Okay, y'know what – whatever, okay? Anyways, how are those signatures coming, Mike?"

Mike grimaced as he rooted around in his backpack. He eventually pulled out a slightly rumpled petition with –

"Five signatures? Seriously, Mike?"

"What?" Mike shot back. "You said all of us should get five, didn't you?"

"Ours don't count, idiot!" Dustin banged his fist on the table, causing Will to snort. "You had the petition for 24 hours –" Mike made a show of looking at his fancy calculator watch – "*Almost* 24 hours and you got one measly signature?"

Mike hunched his shoulders. "Yeah, sorry I'm such an introvert today. Geez."

Will frowned. "Since when are you an introvert?"

"I mean. Obviously not with you guys. Just – I dunno. I didn't feel like talking to other people yesterday or today, y'know?" Will nodded in understanding as Dustin rolled his eyes. "The only reason Greg signed is 'cause he saw it poking out of my notebook and asked what it was."

"Greg McCorkle. What a legend," Dustin commented. "Anyways," he continued, reaching across the table, "Your petition privileges are revoked. Who's up next?"

"I got it!" volunteered Lucas.

"Do you promise to get more than one signature?"

"Scout's honor!"

Mike spluttered. "But you're not even a –"

"Scout's honor!" repeated Lucas.

* * *

Wednesday, November 30, 1983

"Two?" screeched Dustin. "TWO?"

Lucas clapped a hand over Dustin's mouth. "Shut up, man!" he whispered, eyeing the lunch monitors nervously. "You'll – EW!" he shrieked. "Why would you LICK me?"

"Shut up!" echoed Mike. "You're both idiots!" Dustin wore a shit-eating grin as Lucas wiped his palm on Dustin's sleeve. "And apparently no better at getting signatures than me."

"Uh, excuse me, I got twice as many." Lucas stuck his tongue out. "That's a 100% increase."

Will nodded solemnly. "This is in fact accurate."

Mike turned, furrowing his eyebrows. "Who asked you?" Will just

smiled sweetly back. Mike threw his hands up in frustration.

“This is all beside the point!” interjected Dustin.

“Which is what, precisely?”

“The point, Lucas, is that you and Mike are miserable failures.”

“Oh, yeah? Let’s see you do better then!”

“Fine, give it here then. I’ll have five signatures by this time tomorrow. At least one of whom is a girl!”

Lucas’s eyebrows raised. “And how much are you willing to bet on that, huh?”

Dustin’s eyes narrowed. “Loser buys arcade tokens for the winner... next three times.”

“Done.” Lucas spat on his hand and held it out to Dustin. Dustin spat on his own and shook.

“Anyone else wanna get in on this?” Dustin asked. “Raise the stakes?”

“Nah, man,” Mike replied. “You’re both idiots.” Will just smiled and laughed silently when Dustin looked at him. “Speaking of the arcade,” Mike continued, “What are you all doing after school?”

Dustin and Lucas smiled and nodded approvingly. Will just looked uncomfortable.

“Do you have plans already, Will?” Lucas asked.

“No,” he replied, looking down at his food. “It’s just, well...” he trailed off. Mike lightly elbowed him and let his hand linger in the space between their legs. “It’s just, I dunno how my mom would feel about it.”

“What?” Mike sounded indignant. “That’s such BS! No, Will –” he cut off Will, who looked like he was about to respond – “it is. You haven’t been in school for the past three weeks. Your mom’s been seeing you way more than normal. If you’re too tired or don’t wanna

go with us or whatever –” Dustin watched a flicker of something pass over his face – “that’s one thing. But you’ve gotta at least ask your mom if you do want to go. Please, Will?”

Will hemmed and hawed for a moment but finally relented. “Okay, Mike. I’ll ask. I do want to go,” he added, making eye contact.

“Good.” Mike smiled back.

* * *

Will hadn’t had time to use the payphone during the few remaining minutes of the lunch period, so the Party found themselves by Mrs. Byers’s car after school.

“Hello, boys,” she called, rolling down the window. “What’s going on?”

“Can Will come with us to the arcade today?” Mike asked. “*Pleeease?*”

Mrs. Byers sucked in a breath. “I don’t know, Mike...”

“We’ll be with him the whole time, I promise! Nothing’s gonna happen! He can ride on the back of my bike!”

“Please, Mom?” Will added with his best puppy dog eyes.

Joyce pursed her lips. “Let’s compromise,” she said after a moment. “I’ll drive Will and pick him up at –” she glanced at her watch – “6 PM?”

Mike hesitated a moment, darting a glance at Will, then said, “I, uh – yeah, that’ll work. Thanks, Mrs. Byers.” He gave a half-smile that showed his teeth but didn’t quite reach his eyes. “Could I, uh, ride with you and Will?”

“I’m fine with that, but I don’t think there would be room for your bike, honey.”

“Oh... right.” Mike’s face fell.

“We’ll meet you at the arcade soon, though, okay?”

“Yeah. See you soon, Will!” he added, as Will climbed into the passenger seat.

“Yeah, I’ll see you in like five minutes, Mike.” Will rolled his eyes, but smiled.

“Come on, slowpoke!” Lucas called over his shoulder. He and Dustin had gotten halfway across the parking lot during the exchange.

“Shit. Wait up, guys!” Mike called as he did his best to catch up with them.

The arcade was the same as it ever was, bright colors standing out in Hawkins’s otherwise drab palette. Dustin glanced behind him as he pulled into the parking lot. Lucas was right behind him and Mike was still half a block behind, breathing heavily. *Typical*. The Byers’s car was already there. Will jumped out once he saw Dustin. “Bye, Mom,” he called, heading towards the bike rack to meet Dustin and Lucas (and Mike, whenever he made it).

“Bye, sweetie!” she called back. “I’ll see you at 6, remember?”

“Yes, Mom.” Will rolled his eyes.

“And if anything happens, I’ll be at Melvald’s, so you can call me from the payphone. You have quarters, right?”

“Yes, Mom.” He turned to leave.

“I love you!” Joyce called from the car.

“Love you too,” Will responded, not looking over his shoulder.

By the time Will made it over to the bike rack, Mike had finally arrived, somewhat out of breath. “Hey, slowpoke,” Lucas teased, lightly punching Mike on the arm.

“Screw you, Lucas,” Mike muttered.

“Gentlemen,” Dustin interrupted, “Shall we?”

The arcade was full of the usual clientele – preteens and teens

ignoring the fact they had homework, driven inside by the colder temperatures. Once inside, they headed straight for the counter to buy their tickets (it didn't escape Dustin's notice that Mike surreptitiously slipped Will a few extra quarters in line) and Dustin lingered after the others drifted off. No one was in line behind him. Perfect.

"Hey... Keith," he started, remembering to read his nametag just in time.

"What, pipsqueak." Keith did not sound amused. *Better hurry this along.*

"Could you sign this for me?" Dustin asked, putting on his most ingratiating smile while sliding the petition across the counter.

"Petition for Fair Chocolate Pudding... What the hell is this."

"It's –" Dustin's eye caught on someone else in the arcade. "You know, Keith," he wheedled, "I'm going to be talking to everyone in the arcade to get them to sign... including *her*. Want me to put in a good word for you?" He waggled his eyebrows suggestively.

"You would do that for me?" Keith looked torn between skeptical and hopeful. *Got him.*

"Of course, my man!" Dustin cajoled. "I can tell her how cool you are for being the first person here to support our charitable cause!"

"Fuck it," muttered Keith, "Whatever, pipsqueak." He pulled a short, chewed pencil out from under the counter and signed disinterestedly. "You'd better come through for me, tiny freak."

"You got it," Dustin replied as he turned away to find the Party, the words only causing him a slight twinge.

"There you are!" commented Lucas. "What, did you get lost?"

"Nah, just had to relieve myself real quick, ya feel?"

Lucas wrinkled his face as Will commented, "Ew, gross, Dustin!"

“You wanna talk about gross? Starting out on Asteroids is gross!”

Lucas shrugged his shoulders. Mike shot him a glare. Will, currently playing, just ignored him. For good measure, Mike shot him another glare.

“You know that Sp-”

“Yes, Dustin,” Mike interrupted, “we know that Space Duel has a multiplayer mode, but you seem to forget that it just came out last year so obviously Hawkins doesn’t have one yet. And *some* of us like Asteroids just fine,” he finished with a huff, turning back to watch Will play with a fierce look on his face.

Dustin shared a look with Lucas and they both shrugged. He hadn’t meant anything by it – just some friendly ribbing. But they’d all been on edge ever since... everything. Whatever.

Mike was up next on Asteroids. He played more aggressively than usual, firing fast and furious, allowing him to get further than he usually did – but still nowhere near Will’s best. As Dustin got on the controls, he overheard Will whispering reassurances to Mike. Thank god. A cranky Mike was no fun for anyone, and if anyone could get him out of one of his funks, it was Will.

Dustin and Lucas had thoroughly average games – solid and respectable rounds, but nothing to write home about. Asteroids wasn’t a terrible warm-up, Dustin admitted to himself in the privacy of his own mind. Mike didn’t need his ego stroked *that* much. Speaking of egos...

As the other three drifted off to Pac-Man (Mike’s best game – pure coincidence, Dustin was sure), Dustin sidled away. The girl he’d spotted earlier was still in the same place.

“Hey,” he said as he got close enough for it to not be incredibly awkward.

The girl rolled her eyes. “No, I won’t play videogames with you. No, I won’t go on a date with you. Does that answer your questions?”

“Whoa!” Dustin held his hand out in defense. “I... wasn’t going to ask

you out! Uh, no offense?”

The girl frowned. “So what did you want, then?”

This close to her, Dustin realized how much taller and older she must be. “Uh,” he stammered. “I was wondering if you could sign my petition?” He offered it out in front of him.

She grabbed it out of his hands, scanned it quickly, and barked out a laugh. “More pudding, huh?” she asked, eyeing him up and down. “Sure, I’ll sign. Got a pen?”

Dustin rummaged around in his pockets, coming up with a pen after a few moments, holding it out to her. “Keith was the first person to sign it here, by the way,” he added as she uncapped the pen, gesturing over to the counter. “He’s a pretty rad dude.”

The girl gave him a level stare. “I’m pretty sure that’s the first time anyone has ever called Keith rad. I assume he put you up to this?”

“I mean...” Dustin stuttered. “It was the only way to get him to sign my petition.”

The girl smiled. “Ha! A budding salesman. I like you, kid. Here ya go.” She handed back the petition and pen.

“Thanks... Robin,” he added, looking at her signature. “What are you doing here if you don’t play videogames, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“None of your business, dingus.” She smiled, but it didn’t reach her eyes. “Just lying low for a little whiles.”

Dustin nodded, pretending like he understood. “Right, yeah.” He stood in awkward silence for a moment, then jerked his thumb over his shoulder. “I’m just gonna –”

The girl laughed again. “Yeah, go on back to your friends. Thanks for being decent.”

“Uh, yeah. You too.”

On his way back to the Party, Dustin was accosted by two small humans. They had to be at least a few years younger than him. “Uh, can I help you?”

“What’s that girl doing here?” the taller one asked.

Dustin frowned. “I dunno.”

“But you were just talking to her!” The shorter one now.

“Yeah, so?”

“So what’s she doing here? Girls don’t play videogames.”

“I told you, I don’t know!”

“You made her sign something.”

“Oh, yeah. I have a petition. You wanna sign?”

The boys exchanged a look, then the shorter one held his hand out. “Pudding, huh?”

“Yeah, at Hawkins Middle. What grade are you two in anyways?”

“Fifth,” the taller replied. “So we’ll be there next year. And we like chocolate pudding.”

Dustin grinned. “I like the way you think. Want a pen?”

“Nah, I got one. Pleasure doing business with you,” the other boy replied. The boys were still whisper-arguing about whether to talk to Robin when Dustin left, two signatures richer.

Mike hadn’t lost a single life by the time Dustin finally floated back to Pac-man. Will gave him a quizzical glance but Dustin just waved a hand and smiled. Will must not have been that invested in knowing – he could easily be the most tenacious Party member when he wanted to be – but he just turned back to watch Mike continue to dominate the ghosts.

“Hey.” Lucas poked him to get his attention. “Galaga just opened up.

Wanna play?”

“Hell yeah. You ready to get your ass kicked, Sinclair?”

“In your dreams!”

* * *

Thursday, December 1, 1983

“Shit. Shit,” Dustin muttered to himself as he entered Hawkins Middle the next morning.

“Ha!” Lucas replied, walking next to him. “Told you you couldn’t get five signatures either.” He stuck his tongue out. Once they reached their lockers, Dustin shoved his things inside and stalked off.

“Hey, where are you going?” Mike called after him.

“To win!” Dustin called back over his shoulder, shooting Lucas the middle finger.

As he wandered the school, the other students parted around him. Normally, this would be ideal. Bursting into the school assembly last month had made most people give them an even wider berth than usual, but right now it was damn inconvenient. Eventually, he made it down to the gym. The halls were mostly clear since no one had gym for homeroom. Just a couple of arrogant basketball bros shooting hoops. No one who would give him the time of day.

“Hey, Toothless!”

Dustin felt his shoulders automatically tense up, but then realised luck was on his side. Troy and James were the perfect people to run into right now. He turned around and smiled at them. “Hi, Troy. Hi, James! What’s up?”

They stopped in their tracks.

“What, don’t know what to do when people are friendly to you? Been so long, you don’t have a mental schema anymore? Figures. How’s your arm healing, Troy?”

Troy bared his teeth, stepping back and touching his cast with his other hand. "Fuck you, Henderson."

"No thanks," Dustin replied. "This body is for the ladies exclusively. And I think you fail to grasp two points. One, I have no reason to be scared of you anymore. Two, I actually do care how your arm's doing, and specifically if you can hold a pen."

"The hell?" Troy muttered to James, who just shrugged back.

"Sorry," said Dustin, speaking more slowly and loudly. "Can. You. Sign. Your. Name?"

"Yeah," Troy sneered. "Why do you care, wastoid?"

"Because," Dustin replied calmly, "You're signing my petition."

"Like hell we are!" retorted James.

"What's that?" asked Dustin, cocking a hand to his ear. "Didn't quite catch that. Did you say, 'I want a broken arm too'? We can arrange that, if that's what you want." He smiled disarmingly.

"She's g-gone," stuttered Troy.

"Oh?" Dustin raised one eyebrow.

"Yeah, she hasn't been in school since – the quarry."

Dustin rolled her eyes. "She literally has superpowers and you think she just goes to Hawkins Middle School? Man, sometimes I forget just how dumb you are. But –" he continued before he could be interrupted – "fortunately, I have a mutually agreeable solution in mind. You both sign my petition and then we forget this ever happened. Deal?"

"What's in it for us, huh?" asked James.

"The continued use of your limbs." Dustin smiled sweetly, thrusting his tongue into the gap.

"Fine," Troy muttered, quelling James's half-hearted protest with a

brusque look. "Give it here." He signed awkwardly, glaring daggers at Dustin the whole time, then handed it off to James.

"Congratulations on contributing to humanity for once in your miserable lives," Dustin remarked as he snatched the pen and paper back. "Catch you later, fellas!" He would have just enough time to make it to first period without getting marked tardy.

* * *

"Boys," Mr. Clarke called as they went to exit the classroom, "Can you stay behind for a moment?"

The Party paused, then returned to gather around Mr. Clarke's desk. "What's up, Mr. Clarke?" Dustin asked as the other students continued to filter out of the room.

"First off, I wanted to say how good it is to see the four of you back together this week." They all smiled and Mike slung an arm around Will's shoulders, giving him a light noogie and causing him to lose his balance a little. "And," Mr. Clarke continued, "I was wondering if you wanted to re-start A/V Club this afternoon!"

"Hell yeah!" said Dustin – "Er, I mean, yes, Mr. Clarke, very much so." Lucas gave him side eye, but nodded his assent. Mike glanced at Will and they both nodded too.

"Excellent!" said Mr. Clarke, rubbing his hands together in anticipation. "I'll see you boys after school then. Now off to lunch with you!"

"Yes, sir," Dustin replied, saluting as he backed away from the desk. He started to trip over a desk when Lucas caught his elbow. "Dumbass," Lucas whispered, softly enough so Mr. Clarke wouldn't hear.

"No, you," Dustin retorted as they exited the classroom. Not his best work.

"Yeah, well at least I'm gonna be a rich dumbass with all those arcade tokens you buy for me."

Dustin just wiggled his eyebrows.

"Wait," cut in Mike, "Did you get another signature?"

Dustin shrugged. "I guess you'll just have to wait and see." He smiled mysteriously.

"Fuck you, man," Lucas commented. "You didn't talk to anyone besides us in classes this morning. There's no way you got someone to talk to you in those ten minutes before school, 'cause if you did, you would have told us already 'cause you're a big blabbermouth!"

"I am not!" replied Dustin, mock-offended. "Right, Will?"

Will opened his mouth, but all he said was, "Uhhh..."

"Blabbermouth, blabbermouth!" taunted Lucas.

By the time they got to the lunchroom, Dustin had successfully worked up the other three to a frenzy. As soon as they sat down, Dustin presented the petition with a flourish. "Read it and weep, losers!"

"...Six?" asked Will, sounding impressed.

"Keith? That's cheating!" Mike sounded scandalized.

"Who are Adam and Corey?"

"Whoa, guys, one at a time!" Dustin held up his hands in mock-surrender. "Yes, Will, I got six signatures, because I am a competent human being unlike those two lumps over there." He ignored their noises of protest. "Keith is not cheating. We never put age limits on it. It's called strategy." Mike grumbled under his breath. "And Adam and Corey are two fifth-graders. They'll be at Hawkins Middle next year and therefore have a vested interest in the outcome of our petition. I see you have more questions," he continued, not allowing them to cut in. "Yes, Lucas, Robin Buckley is an honest-to-goodness girl. And yes, Mike, *that* Troy and James."

"But how? And why?" Mike spluttered.

"I mean, a signature is a signature," Dustin replied, "and I reminded them about a certain mutual friend." He grinned ferally, but stopped when he saw Mike shrink back into himself. "Anyways. You're up, Willfred. Think you can make up for the poor showing of Tweedledee and Tweedledum?"

"Yeah, I think I can handle that," he smiled, accepting the proffered paper. "Be right back, guys."

"Wait," Mike protested, "Aren't you gonna buy lunch first?"

"I'll be back in a sec, Mike. Don't get your undies in a twist!"

Mike screwed his face up. "Ugh, fine."

Will just laughed, swatting him on the back of the head. "I'll be back soon, you goof!" He got up calmly and the other three watched as he made his way over to –

"A girls' table?" Lucas exclaimed incredulously.

"He's talking to *Jenny Hayes*," Dustin pointed out, wiggling his eyebrows. Apparently that was enough to earn himself a smack from Mike. "Ouch! Fucker! What was that for?"

"Will doesn't like girls like that yet. Don't be gross!"

Dustin rubbed his arm. "Whatever you say, Wheeler," he muttered.

"Shut up, guys," Lucas interrupted, pointing over at Will, "Look!" Jenny signed the petition, then she handed it to Stacey, then Mindy, then Maggie, then Mary Ellen, then Tracy, then Mandy. And they all signed it. Dustin's jaw was still hanging open as Will wove his way back to the table.

"How – you –" Mike spluttered as Will smiled fiercely, his lips pursed together and eyes sparkling.

"I told you I'm friends with Jenny. So I walked over to her and explained what we were trying to do and asked. What? You think girls don't like chocolate pudding?"

“But you – just went over and *talked* to them?” Lucas was in awe.

“I mean... yeah? It’s not like they’re a different species or anything!” Will chuckled. “I don’t know why none of you thought to do it first.”

Lucas flushed as Mike once again tried to produce a sentence. “I – it’s different – you can’t just –”

“What Mike is trying to say,” Dustin cut in smoothly, “is that – unlike such a fine upstanding gentleman as yourself – he is an awkward beanstalk unaware of the mysteries of the fairer sex.”

“Yeah, screw you too, Dustin,” Mike retorted, flipping him off. “We got you your twenty signatures. What happens now?”

“Now?” Dustin asked rhetorically. “Now we go to Mr. Clarke.”

* * *

“So let me get this straight,” said Mr. Clarke, resting his chin on his hands as he stared at them from across the A/V room table. “You’d like to petition the school to distribute more chocolate pudding, and you’ve acquired signatures of approximately 10% of the student body, although several of the signatures don’t belong to current students?”

“Yes, that’s correct,” Dustin confirmed as the other three nodded in agreement.

“I appreciate your enterprising spirit, boys,” Mr. Clarke continued, “but unfortunately I have no control over pudding distribution.”

“But you know everything!” Dustin protested. “Are you telling me that you’re leaving this curiosity door shut?”

“I don’t know everything,” Mr. Clarke chuckled, but I do know a lot of things. For instance, if you boys want to talk to someone who *could* change things, I can try to get you a meeting with the vice principal tomorrow at the end of the day.”

“The vice principal?” Lucas asked. “Are we in trouble?”

Mr. Clarke laughed again. "The administration does other things besides punishing students, you know. It's their job to make sure the school keeps running and teaches you as well as possible."

"And that we're fed as well as possible?" Dustin countered.

"I suppose so, yes," Mr. Clarke agreed. "Are there any other questions I can answer before we wrap this meeting up?"

The boys glanced at each other. "I don't think so," Dustin replied. "Thanks for your help, Mr. Clarke."

"Of course! My pleasure. Now get on with you," he said, shooing them out of the room.

"So," Mike asked as they headed outside, "Sleepover at mine tomorrow?" Lucas and Dustin quickly agreed, but Will hesitated. "Will?" Mike asked. "We can ask your mom if you want to, but it's okay if you're not up for it."

Will avoided Mike's gaze. "I'll ask my mom and call you later."

"Sure," Mike agreed.

"But she's right there!" said Lucas, pointing.

"Oh, yeah. You can ask her now!" Mike agreed.

Will looked uncomfortable. "Oh. Uh... yeah. I'll – be right back, okay?" He took off before the others could follow him. There was a brief whispered conversation at the car window and Will looked more relaxed when he came back. "So, uh, I have good news and bad news..."

"Bad news first," Dustin said immediately. Lucas gave him a look. "What? Always bad news first! That way you don't end sad."

Will waited patiently for them to finish. After a pause he continued. "So, uh, the bad news is that my mom won't let me go to yours tomorrow night, Mike. "He continued over their protests. "BUT. You're all invited to my house." He smiled.

"See, he should have led with that Dustin!" Mike scolded, punching Dustin with one arm while pulling Will into a side-hug with the other. "We'll be there for sure."

* * *

Friday, December 2, 1983

"That was such BS!" Dustin complained as they exited the vice principal's office.

The secretary shot him a disapproving glance. "Language, young man!"

"Sorry, ma'am," Dustin replied contritely, but continued as soon as they were out in the hallway. "Like. He was totally talking out of both sides of his mouth, making it sound like he was on our side without actually committing to anything. Nothing is gonna happen, mark my words. It's all bullshit."

"Yeah, it is man," Lucas agreed. "Hey, I've gotta grab some books from my locker. I'll meet you out by the bike rack, yeah?"

"Oh, I'll come with you," Will added. "I need my math book to get caught up on this weekend."

"I'll –"

"Come on, Mike," Dustin interrupted, grabbing his shoulder and dragging him down the hall towards the exit. "I'm not gonna wait outside all by onesie." Mike struggled, making noises of distress until he finally shoved off Dustin's hand. "And we both know," Dustin lowered his voice, "that you don't actually need to get anything from your locker."

"Then wh–"

"Can it, Wheeler," Dustin replied, waving a hand. "You think I haven't noticed?"

"Noticed what?"

“You and Will.”

“What about me and Will?”

Dustin rolled his eyes. “It blows my mind how oblivious you are sometimes. You’ve been super-protective of Will ever since he got back – like, even more so than usual.”

“Weren’t you just saying a few weeks ago that Lucas was my best friend?”

“I was just making a point. Will wasn’t available then, and whatever you have with him – it’s different, y’know? Like even when I met you guys it was ‘Lucas’ and ‘MikeandWill’. I’m not saying that’s a bad thing –” he continued, cutting off Mike’s protests – “Just laying down the facts.”

“He’s my best friend,” Mike defended himself, but by the look on his face even he knew how lame that sounded.

“Yeah, sure, fine, whatever. All I’m saying is that Will will be safe going to his locker with Lucas. You don’t wanna smother him.”

“I – yeah, I know. We’ve talked about that, actually. We’re cool.”

“Okay, good. As long as the two of you are good, I’m good. We need both our paladin and our cleric.”

“Is that all?”

“Yeah, we’re good.” By this point, they had reached the bike racks. “Anything you wanna mention about your bike, by the way?”

“Huh?”

Dustin gestured meaningfully at the bike rack, where Mike’s bike was conspicuously absent.

“I told you this morning, my tires needed more air and I didn’t have time to pump them up this morning, so my mom had to drive me in,” Mike said defensively.

Dustin nodded sagely. “And how did your tires come to be in this lamentable state, Mr. Wheeler? I’m sure it was merely a coincidence that your tires happened to deflate on a morning when you could ride home with Will.”

“I – what? What are you implying?”

Dustin cast him a level glare. “Friends don’t lie, Mike.”

Mike flushed. “Shut up,” he muttered weakly.

Dustin grinned and pumped his fist. “I *knew* it. I KNEW it!”

“So what?” Mike countered. “So what if I care about Will staying safe? I was – when he – I didn’t – I should have ridden home with him that night. I was the last one to see him. I can’t –”

“Whoa, Mike,” Dustin interrupted him, clapping him on the back, “Lots to unpack there buddy, and I’m happy to chat later, but Lucas and Will are about to show up –” he jerked a thumb over his shoulder – “and Mrs. Byers is pulling up. So man up for now and we can deconstruct your psyche, yeah?”

Mike inhaled through his nose and sighed. “Yeah. Thanks, man.” He smiled.

Mrs. Byers looked a little harried as she pulled up to the curb by Dustin and Mike and rolled down the window. “Hi boys,” she called out. “Where’s Will? Is he okay? Is he –?”

“Hi, Mrs. Byers!” Dustin waved, a grin on his face. “Will and Lucas just went to grab some books from their lockers. They’re just coming out now.”

Dustin could see the tension leave her shoulders when she laid eyes on Will. “Oh, good.”

“So,” Dustin continued, “On an unrelated topic, Mike may need a ride to your house.”

“Oh?” Joyce asked, turning to face Mike.

"My bike tires were deflated this morning," Mike muttered, not quite managing to avoid Dustin's elbow. "So my mom had to drop me off."

"Well, of course you can ride with us," Joyce offered, reaching an arm back to clear some debris off the backseat. "Let me just – make some room..."

"Hey guys!" Will called out when he got close enough. "Are you riding home with us, Mike?"

"Yeah, if that's okay?" Mike raised his eyebrows as Dustin rolled his eyes at Mike's continued obliviousness.

Will frowned in confusion. "Of course. Why wouldn't it be?"

"Just get in already," Lucas drawled, straddling his bike. "We'll meet you there."

* * *

"So," asked Mrs. Byers during a lull in conversation partway through dinner, "Did you boys get to meet with Mr. Higgins today?"

"Well, we did, but –" Mike started as Will nodded, his mouth full.

"It was complete BS," Dustin continued. "Sorry, Mrs. B, but it really was. He met with us, but all he said is that he 'appreciated our initiative' and 'would take it under consideration'." He shook his head sadly. "Everyone knows that's adult for 'no'." Lucas nodded gloomily in agreement.

"Well," Mrs. Byers said, "Life is sometimes like that. You don't always get everything you want, or even everything you need. But I'm so proud of you all, and hope you keep trying to make this world a better place."

Dustin grinned. "By the time we get to high school, we'll be unstoppable!"

Mrs. Byers laughed. "I don't doubt that. I don't doubt that at all."

* * *

“Hang on, guys,” Will said, standing up from their game of Scrabble (which Dustin was currently dominating, like usual). “I gotta use the bathroom. Don’t skip me, okay?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Lucas waved lazily, studying his tiles.

Once the bathroom door shut, Mike looked at both of them. “Guys,” he said seriously. “We’ve all been having nightmares, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Dustin agreed, and Lucas nodded along.

“And obviously Will and I are too. And – I dunno what Will will wanna do, but sometimes we’ll share a bed when I sleep over and... it helps. So if that happens tonight, there will be absolutely no teasing. Got it?” There was the threat of murder in his eyes.

“As long as I don’t have to share a bed with any of you, what you and Will do is your business,” Lucas replied.

“That’s right,” Mike agreed. “And it doesn’t make us – homosexuals or anything –” he grimaced – “it just... helps.”

“Yeah, we’re cool, man,” Dustin agreed.

Down the hall, the toilet flushed. “And this conversation didn’t happen, got it?”

“Got it,” Dustin and Lucas echoed in unison.

“Everything okay, guys?” Will asked as he stepped back into the room. “I didn’t mean none of you could take *your* turns.”

“Lucas was just being indecisive,” Dustin offered. “He’s trying to figure out how to get to the triple word score and won’t accept that he can’t.”

“Just *play* already,” Mike whined. Dustin sighed in relief as they settled back into their usual banter.

Later that night, as he and Lucas were getting into their sleeping bags, Dustin smiled as Mike turned off the light and snuck under Will’s covers, illuminated by the soft glow of the Christmas lights. He

was happy that his friends were happy, of course. He also couldn't wait to be twenty dollars richer. Good thing he was a patient man.